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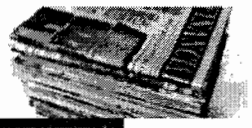

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Healthier food shopping is here to stay

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It's no passing phase: the movement by increasingly health-conscious consumers seeking to satisfy their appetites with food that's convenient, easy on the waistline - and hopefully the wallet - is here to stay, experts attending the National Grocery Conference said Monday.

The two-day conference in Ottawa, co-hosted by the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors and Food and Consumer Products of Canada, showcased leading experts from North America and abroad discussing trends and innovation in grocery retailing and products.

Probiotics which encourage intestinal health and slow-release foods promoting satiety and feelings of fullness are among the leading trends, as well as foods fusing the concept of convenience with healthy eating, Gabby Nobrega with Food and Consumer Products of Canada said from Ottawa.

"Most of the trends you're seeing in store shelves is free: gluten-free . . . reduced trans (fat), reduced sodium, whole line of free, whole line of ingredient added," she said.

"It's both the contrast of reduction met with the contrary trend of adding where there's a functional or superfood benefit."

Customers are willing to pay more for products with added benefits, such as fortified foods and those containing omega-3 fatty acids and lycopene, said Nancy Croitoru, president and CEO of Food and Consumer Products of Canada.

"On one side of it they're looking for indulgence products, but on the other side of it they're looking for products where they can get some health benefit, so it's really novel foods that are driving growth," she said.

Canada's regulatory system needs to be modified to ensure retailers and food distributors can keep up with customer demand, Croitoru said.

"When products have a shelf life of maybe 18 months, if it takes 24 months to bring a product to market, it's too late," she said.

"That's why the approval processes need to be streamlined, and the other thing is that the regulatory process needs to be reformed so that companies can make claims, health claims about their products so that they can let . . . consumers know what benefits they have in their products."

Easy access to products generally tops the list of key factors for time- pressed consumers navigating the grocery aisles, with quality and affordable prices following behind, said Nick Jennery, president of the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors.

"Consumers are willing to spend more if the quality of the product is there, " he said.

New ideas in consumerism are accelerating largely due to social networking and blogs, allowing trends to develop much faster than they did five years ago, said **Jim Carroll**, a futurist, trends and innovation expert who spoke at the conference.

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